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David Straddler
University of Cincinnati

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Linking Mission and Identity at the University Of Cincinnati

DAVID STRADLING*

INTRODUCTION

As the University of Cincinnati approaches its bicentennial celebration, those connected to the university should take the time to contemplate the institution's identity. I do not mean that we should refresh the university's branding or that we should launch a new marketing campaign, although those things may indeed happen. Rather, I believe the university community—faculty, staff, administration, students, alumni, and emeriti—must articulate what the university should be doing and assess how well it is doing it. In other words, the university community should take this moment to discuss the institution's mission, which I believe is intimately tied to its identity. The relationship is twofold. First, the mission should articulate who the university is intended to serve. Second, a full articulation of mission must describe what service the university expects to provide. These fundamental questions of mission inevitably raise another: who counts as part of the university community, or, phrased differently, who are the university's constituents? Taken together these questions are essential to identity, since group membership and purpose are central to our conceptions of ourselves.

For the last several years, I have been researching and writing a history of the University of Cincinnati (UC), taking into consideration its predecessors, including Cincinnati College, founded in 1819, the Cincinnati College of Law, established in 1833, and the university itself, legally created in 1870.¹ It should surprise no one that these institutions' missions have shifted over the course of two-hundred years, since over the same period the nation witnessed the legal abolition of slavery, the rise of the industrial economy, two world wars, half a dozen serious economic crises and one Great Depression, a baby boom, a Cold War, a failed war in Southeast Asia, and a rights revolution that is still ongoing. The university accommodated communications revolutions, including radio (creating its own station, WGUC) and television (on which it once offered courses), and it is working arduously to make the best use of the internet and smart technology. At the

* Associate Dean for Humanities and Zane L. Miller Professor of History, University of Cincinnati.

¹ DAVID STRADLING, *IN SERVICE TO THE CITY: A HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI* (2018).

same time, academic fields have multiplied. The university has added programs as disparate as Aerospace Engineering, Environmental Studies, Radiology, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. UC and its predecessors have also shifted in ownership. Several entities, including Cincinnati College and the College of Law, began as private institutions, and before becoming a state school, UC had a one-hundred-year run as a municipally owned university. In sum, dramatic changes in the nation's economy, culture, and politics have ensured that the institution's mission could never be a settled matter.

Despite all this, UC's mission has had two constants, both of which speak to the purpose of higher education generally. First, UC has been a center of disinterested inquiry and open discourse. Each generation of faculty and students has sought truth, whether new or ancient, comforting or disruptive. The topics of inquiry and the techniques of research have shifted markedly, but the goals of truth-seeking and truth-speaking have persisted. Of course, one might debate how consistently the research has been disinterested and how open the discourse, but these have indeed been central to the university's historical mission and identity.

Second, UC has been continuously dedicated to the public good. Certainly the definition of "the public" has changed significantly over the years, and Cincinnatians, like all Americans, have never agreed on who counts as part of the public. So too, conceptions of "good" have changed over time. In 1819, in a relatively young republic, a college could most clearly serve the public good by instilling character in its students, and in the citizenry more broadly. Founders of Cincinnati College thought higher education should elevate the human spirit through exposure to the best of what has been thought and said, to use Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century phrase.² As Stanford University President David Starr Jordan put it just after the turn of the twentieth century, "The highest function of the university is the formation of character, the training of men and women, in purity and strength, in sweetness and light."³ Today common conceptions of how universities can best serve the public good are modest in comparison. They tend to describe the university's purpose as increasing students' earning potential, instilling an entrepreneurial spirit, and, altogether, fueling economic growth, in the city, region, and nation. Despite the dramatic shift in definition, it does matter that UC has always thought of its mission as primarily one of serving the public good, in part because recent surveys suggest that universities should not assume that this aspect of their mission is self-evident to the public.⁴

² MATTHEW ARNOLD, *CULTURE AND ANARCHY: AN ESSAY IN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM* viii (1869).

³ DAVID STARR JORDAN, *THE VOICE OF THE SCHOLAR: WITH OTHER ADDRESSES ON THE PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION* 190 (1903).

⁴ *Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (Jul. 10,

This essay traces the major shifts in UC's mission and identity, keeping in mind the questions of who it serves, and what service it provides. These may seem rather straightforward concerns, especially for an institution that has had 200 years to hone its mission, but a quick review of UC's history makes clear that the university community has rarely reached a consensus on these central questions. Just as important, in the recent past, conceptions of UC's mission and identity have become especially muddled. What follows addresses some broad shifts in the role of higher education in the United States, but also institutionally specific shifts that have arisen from local conditions.

I. CONNECTING THE WESTERN FRONTIER TO WESTERN TRADITIONS

Euro-American settlers founded Cincinnati in 1788, and for decades it remained a small village, a frontier outpost distant from coastal population centers. Cincinnati gained incorporation as a city in 1819—the same year Cincinnati's history of higher education properly begins. That January, the State of Ohio chartered two private institutions: Cincinnati College and the Medical College of Ohio. Both were designed to train the community's future leaders. Cincinnati College offered a Classical education, in which students studied Greek and Roman literature, especially epic poetry, history, and political theory. Students also studied science—mathematics and chemistry—but mostly their training connected them to the traditions of Western Civilization. A Classical education made them conversant in art and aesthetics, and made them comfortable with the language of the cultural elite. In all these ways Cincinnati College was typical for the United States, except for its location on the frontier. Indeed, the college's location may have made this type of education seem all the more important, because on the frontier so much appeared to be in flux and at stake. This may be why Cincinnati College was created so early, too early really, before the elite could afford it. Despite the moral and financial support of the city's small wealthy class (those associated with this early effort constitute a Who's Who of Cincinnati), the college faltered after just a few years, collapsing under the debt burden accumulated in constructing and improving the college edifice at the corner of Fourth and Walnut.

Despite this early failure, the college's creation and curriculum tell us a great deal about what Cincinnatians thought about higher education. The college would train students in oration and the writing of critical essays, skills that would be essential to the cultural elite and to political leaders. Students had no choice in the courses they took. They were expected to gather the wisdom of the ages by consuming the canon. They did very little that would strike us as preparing them for the workforce. Inherent in this early

2017), <http://www.people-press.org/2017/07/10/sharp-partisan-divisions-in-views-of-national-institutions/>.

nineteenth-century conception of higher education was a central tension around democracy. Supporters of Classical education thought the still-young American republic could only flourish if its leaders had a strong moral foundation and a refined aesthetic sense, both of which could be instilled through a connection to Classical Civilizations, especially Greece, the birthplace of democracy. At the same time, supporters understood that this education was necessary *only* for the leadership class—the white, male leadership class. In other words, the supporters of Cincinnati College thought it would both promote and delimit democracy. The constituency of Cincinnati College was decidedly and purposefully elite.

II. THE MODERN MUNICIPAL UNIVERSITY

By 1870, when the University of Cincinnati was created, American thinking about higher education had shifted. Eight years earlier, the Morrill Act had initiated the creation of Land Grant colleges, one in each state to be endowed by federal lands. With an emphasis on agriculture and mechanics, fields with direct economic consequences for the nation, the Land Grant colleges were to engage in practical research and offer practical education. Through the mid-1800s, higher education also became much more democratic in practice, attracting a higher percentage of Americans and a greater diversity. Especially in the Midwest, new public institutions tended to admit women as well as men, and some institutions—beginning with Ohio’s Oberlin College—sought to educate African Americans too.

And so, the University of Cincinnati was conceived at a very different moment than Cincinnati College, and its origin is entirely unique. In a singular event in American history, Charles McMicken, a successful Cincinnati- and Louisiana-based merchant, bequeathed much of his landed property to the City of Cincinnati so that it could create an institution of higher learning. McMicken expected that rents would endow two colleges—one for men and one for women—to be built on his estate on the hillside north of Over-the-Rhine. McMicken, who died just before the Civil War, set the creation of UC in motion, but his will proved an incomplete guide to its formation. Instead, as was the case with Cincinnati College, UC’s structure and curriculum were developed by a group of wealthy white males, Alphonso Taft among them. But what they created reflected the new reality.

From the very outset, the University of Cincinnati educated men and women in a variety of fields, including art, engineering, and, of course, Classical literature. Although McMicken’s will specified that his college should educate “white boys and girls,” a clear indication that he intended to support the instruction of only white students, UC never excluded African Americans by policy.⁵ The high school education most black students

⁵ CHARLES McMICKEN, THE WILL OF CHARLES McMICKEN OF CINCINNATI, OHIO 19 (1858).

received was enough to exclude them, as most were not prepared to pass the entrance exam. That said, as a municipally owned and supported university, UC provided a free education to any qualified city resident, regardless of race or gender. In 1886, Henry Malachi Griffin became the first African American to graduate from UC. Very early on, the city augmented McMicken's endowment with dedicated property taxes and bond sales, steps that helped solidify the university's connection to average Cincinnatians.

The new university did not flourish at first, perhaps limited by its unfortunate location, halfway up the hill. UC did not begin to reach its potential as a municipal asset until it moved to the top of the hill and into Burnet Woods, where it could develop a real campus, and after the 1904 arrival of President Charles Dabney, who expanded the university and made service to the city the institution's central mission. Dabney worked to elevate UC's national reputation by making it an exemplar of an urban university, one that served the city's citizens, whether they were enrolled or not. The key to Dabney's success was that he always remembered who the university's core constituents were: regional students of modest means, those who didn't have the wherewithal to attend elite colleges elsewhere. He valorized these students (using the gendered language of his day): "There is a big difference, in the first place, between the boy who is sent and the one who goes, and there is a greater difference between the atmosphere of one of these Eastern cloistered colleges where young men spend their fathers' money and have a good time, and the Western college where they spend their own money and time in preparing for their life's work."⁶

Under Dabney's leadership, the university created the Engineering College, College of Commerce, and the Graduate College. It absorbed the Miami Medical College and a School of Nursing. It invented and instituted co-operative education, first in engineering and then in commerce. It continued to offer a free education to any prepared resident of the City of Cincinnati, and it provided a variety of services directly to other departments of the city government, including creating and operating a municipal reference library, long housed in city hall, where government officials could study the latest publications on urban problem solving. In sum, UC became the model municipal university, providing a wide range of services to the city, both on campus and off.

III. THE RIGHTS REVOLUTION AND THE POSTWAR ECONOMIC ENGINE

The University of Cincinnati remained a municipal university through the Great Depression and World War II, but the dramatic expansion of those seeking higher education—largely driven by the G.I. Bill and the shifting nature of the American economy—placed new stresses on the university and

⁶ Charles William Dabney, *Charles William Dabney Papers 1905-1918*, in UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE ALUMNAE 5 (1909).

the municipal budget. Gone were the days of free tuition, but income could not keep pace with inflation and increased demand, and facilities became cramped and archaic. Innovations in all areas of instruction and research—from electronics and computer science to medicine and pharmacology—begged greater and greater investments. Following national trends, through the twentieth century UC worked to elevate its research profile, which during the Cold War meant tapping into increasingly large pots of federal research dollars, especially in the areas of science, technology, and medicine. As a consequence of this trend, research conducted at UC was less and less likely to address local concerns, and faculty increasingly set their research agendas without consideration of UC's status as a municipal institution.

The postwar decades witnessed more than just a rise in the number of students attending college; the diversity of those attending increased, too. The G.I. Bill encouraged an explosion in the number of first-generation students, and the shifting economy forced more and more students take to college courses later in life. Women and men, many of them already parents, sought to add new credentials and skills, hoping to enter higher-paying professions in the expanding service sector as middle-class union jobs in industry dissipated. At the end of the 1960s, nearly a third of UC's students took classes in the Evening College, while meeting family obligations or working during the day.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Civil Rights Movement forced the university to improve access and support for African Americans. Some activist students organized into the United Black Association which placed specific demands on the administration. In response, the university added an office to oversee off-campus housing, ensuring that landlords around campus did not discriminate against African American students; it added black administrators and staff, including in the admissions office to improve recruitment of minority students; and, the university created an African American cultural center to provide a welcoming space for the black community on campus. Even as the university added two suburban campuses to serve students who did not want to commute into the city for their education, faculty and city leaders also worked to improve University College, a two-year college based at the main campus that many thought was best positioned to serve the large African American populations in Avondale, Walnut Hills, Evanston, and other neighborhoods close to what is now called the Clifton Campus.

In the 1970s, women also increasingly demanded structural changes that would allow them to succeed in school—including the provision of daycare on campus. Female students created their own counseling help line—"Women Helping Women"—which proved to be especially valuable to survivors of sexual assault. Women also drove the creation of a Women's Studies program, just as African American students and faculty had created a Black Studies program several years earlier. Unfortunately, the university

never did find space on campus for inexpensive daycare for students and faculty. After years of student and faculty activism, the campus was more diverse and supportive, but not yet truly inclusive. In sum, dramatic changes from the 1950s through the 1970s—an expanded student body, an ever-greater variety of degrees they sought, an increased emphasis on research, and a significantly more diverse and activist student population—pulled the university in many different directions.

IV. A NEW IDENTITY IN THE NEW CENTURY?

In the last two decades, during which UC has grown dramatically, the institution has worked to increase its national reputation and international profile. Competition among institutions of higher education, heightened by a leveling off of college-bound U.S. citizens and a decline in available federal research dollars, has encouraged UC and similar regional universities to seek new markets for students, both internationally, by recruiting in engineering and related science fields, and nationally, by investing heavily in Division I athletics as a means of reaching a broader audience. At the same time, the university invested heavily in its campus, hiring internationally renowned architects to create signature buildings. As was the goal of the 1991 Master Plan, the transformation of campus dramatically improved the “college experience” for students, creating a real campus feel in the heart of the city, while simultaneously disconnecting the university from its surroundings and its tradition of using local architects.⁷

The transformation of the campus is symbolic of the unresolved tension in the university’s mission. To what degree should the institution serve its location—the City of Cincinnati and the region around—versus striving to join the ranks of the nation’s elite research universities? UC’s research agenda and its very status as a Carnegie R-1 Doctoral University with the Highest Research Activity has long pulled faculty out of Cincinnati, both metaphorically and physically. For decades, UC’s municipal ownership and its reputation as a parochial urban university led critics of UC’s attachment to place and service to city residents to refer to the institution as a mere “streetcar college.” Despite administrations’ calls for community engagement—revived periodically since Dabney’s day—most faculty have found locally focused research too limiting for career advancement.

At the same time, despite building suburban campuses and ramping up online instruction, UC has retained its substantial economic and physical presence in the city. Although UC stopped expanding its campus footprint decades ago, tension with neighbors has persisted, especially as UC has engaged in expansion through other means, including using Community Development Corporations to transform neighborhoods through

⁷ HARGREAVES ASSOCIATES, THE MASTER PLAN: UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI (1991).

redevelopment,⁸ and, tragically, through expanded off-campus policing, which in 2015 created the situation in which Samuel DuBose was shot and killed by a university officer in Mount Auburn.⁹ Neighborhood activism and the rights revolution more broadly have ensured that UC would have to remain engaged in the community in which it sits. From the United Black Association to the Irate8, student activists have also demanded that the university be responsive to the diverse population of the city and attend to urban problems. The question remains, however, how does this engagement relate to the university's mission and its articulated goal of climbing national rankings?

It is this tension—between attending to the needs of the city or attending to the statistics that improve rankings—that requires open discussion as we celebrate UC's bicentennial. Is it possible that the university might revive its identity as an urban-serving university, revisit its mission as articulated under the leadership of Charles Dabney, and serve the city and its residents, whether they are enrolled or not?

⁸ See, e.g., Amanda Seitz, *Neighbors Unsuccessful in Pushing Back on Latest, Multi-Million Dollar Development*, WCPO CINCINNATI (Sept. 23, 2017), <https://www.wcpo.com/news/insider/neighbors-unsuccessful-in-pushing-back-on-latest-multi-million-dollar-development>.

⁹ MARK J. EHLERS ET AL., REVIEW AND INVESTIGATION OF OFFICER RAYMOND M. TENSING'S USE OF DEADLY FORCE ON JULY 19, 2015: UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI POLICE DEPARTMENT: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS 4-7, 59 (2015).